

## Get to Know Your Government

Reporter Megan Buffington is attending the Grand Rapids City Government Academy this spring 2024 to help us all understand more about how our local governments function.

# Nearly everything you should know about Grand Rapids Area Library

KAXE | By [Megan Buffington](#)

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Lorie Shaull / Special To KAXE

The Grand Rapids Area Library features a large chickadee mural on the outside.

## The City Government Academy brings us to the Grand Rapids Area Library — a place so much more than the books within.

GRAND RAPIDS — It may be in Grand Rapids, but the Grand Rapids Area Library reaches far beyond the city.

Not physically, obviously — the library with its iconic chickadee mural always roosts next to the Mississippi River. But the fifth session of the Grand Rapids' City Government Academy brought us to the busiest library in Northeastern Minnesota outside of Duluth.

Despite six libraries in Itasca County, GRAL handles 75% of the transactions. Over half the checkouts are from people outside the city, which is a long-term pattern going back decades. Yet, the city of Grand Rapids funds 84% of the library's operations. The county funds the remainder.

Part of this disparity is the result of a change to Minnesota's Maintenance of Effort rules, which determine the minimum tax dollars that have to be distributed to the library, among other things.

Will Richter, director of library services for GRAL, said this amount used to increase regularly, helping the library keep up with costs and inflation. But during the 2011 legislative session, the statute changed. The Legislature chopped 10% off the 2011 requirements and froze it. The amount hasn't gone up since.

Richter said the legislation was part of an ongoing struggle between how cities and counties paid to support libraries. The change didn't really affect libraries in the seven-county metro area, which primarily have a different organizational structure, but it did

"We kind of became a sacrificial lamb in rural Minnesota," he said.

Since then, Richter and Tracy Kampa, Grand Rapids' children's librarian, told us Itasca County has only paid the minimum, while Grand Rapids stepped up to help fill the financial gap.

"[The county said], 'We don't have to so therefore we won't,'" Kampa said.

In 2012, Itasca County's [library levy](#) dropped by 10%. The levy remained the same until 2020, when it [increased](#) by \$50,000. It hasn't changed since then.

"But when you look at the city of Grand Rapids, they don't have to, but they do. And if they didn't, we wouldn't be here," she said.

They pointed to Grand Marais and Cook County, which have a joint powers agreement that divides library funding based on use. But that hasn't happened here.



*Megan Buffington / KAXE*

The circulation desk at the Grand Rapids Area Library on May 1, 2024.

"We would love to provide more service to the community," Richter said. "But we have to make economic considerations."

## Those who keep the library going

The library wouldn't be the same without the nonprofit Friends of the Grand Rapids Area Library.

One of the major ways the Friends support GRAL is financially. Straight ahead when you enter the library lobby is the Friends bookstore. Many of the books inside are used books donated to the library that don't fit into the library collection for whatever reason. There are many hidden gems and all for a very affordable price. I'll definitely be making a return trip as part of my effort to buy more books than I could ever possibly need to fill my own personal library.

Before the Friends established the bookstore and other sales like the Annual Used Book Sale — usually during Tall Timber Days — they were able to donate about \$1,200 a year to the library. Now, the number is closer to \$3,000.

That money is hugely important for the library, as their budget only pays for books, materials and staff. All other programming provided by the library is from the Friends or one anonymous donor.

Even with the financial challenges the library has faced, the budget for books hasn't decreased. Kampa said they're still ordering books every day. But as many people can relate to, the same budget doesn't stretch as far as it used to. The budget may not have changed in 12 years, but the price of books has increased, effectively lowering the number of books the library can purchase.

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People who donate their time are also hugely important to a healthy library. In 2023, there were 70 volunteers.

“With staff cut after staff cut, we couldn’t do it without them,” Kampa said.

In 2012, the library had 12 employees. This year, they have eight, and three are part time.

The library’s hours have also shrunk because of budget constraints. GRAL was open 58 hours a week in 2012. Now, they’re open just 36.

The library staff members are acutely aware of the change. One of the library’s biggest challenges is maintaining their service levels, Richter shared. Another is restructuring funding to make it more equitable, which could help address other challenges.

“If I didn’t have a 5-month-old, these are the things that would be keeping me up at night,” Richter said.

### The Chickadee library

The third of the library’s primary challenges is building maintenance. Last year, the library completed Phase One of its maintenance plan. Phase Two includes a roof replacement. Not cheap.

The Grand Rapids Area Library’s current home was built in 1999 on a site that once housed Grand Rapids Public Utilities. Not only is the building’s architecture unique, but its heating system is also quite different.

In 2010, as part of cost-saving measures, the library began to be heated by the Blandin waste stream, which leaves the facility at 130 degrees. The method saves \$20,000 a year in natural gas cost. Plus, it reduces carbon emissions by 65 tons each year, equivalent to the carbon sequestered by 76 acres of forest.





It's amazing what a neat facility the library has — I'm sure unfathomable to the people who started it as a single room in Central School in the late 1890s.

## The Library Board and more

Now, this is a *Get to Know Your Government* column, so we should spend a little time digging into the nitty-gritty of library governance.

The nine-member Grand Rapids Area Library Board is appointed by the City Council, and members serve three-year terms with a three-term limit. The Board is made up of five Grand Rapids residents and four non-residents who reside in the library's official service area.

The Board directs the library's operations and supervises the library director, Richter. The library has its own city fund that the Board is also responsible for reviewing, along with other library financials. Those numbers are all publicly available, posted in the Library Board's [agenda packets](#).

The library is required to submit an annual report to the Minnesota Department of Education, including all sorts of data, from the number of physical materials (70,704 in 2022) to the total public internet computer sessions (3,387).

"Libraries are really good at collecting statistics," Richter said.

The library is a member of the Arrowhead Library System, which includes 27 public libraries in seven northeastern Minnesota counties. In addition to ALS cards, GRAL also accepts any Minnesota library card.

## For the young'uns

Our tour of the library ended in the children's section, with tons of information courtesy of Kampa. The children's library is truly a whimsical place that I wish I could have enjoyed as a child.



The Grand Rapids children's reading programs are the largest in northeastern Minnesota — even bigger than Duluth, which has three library branches.

Its popularity at times even outgrows the library space. Last summer, one story time event had 87 attendees. So, if you ever win the lottery, Kampa said she'd love the opportunity to expand the story time space and the children's library in general.

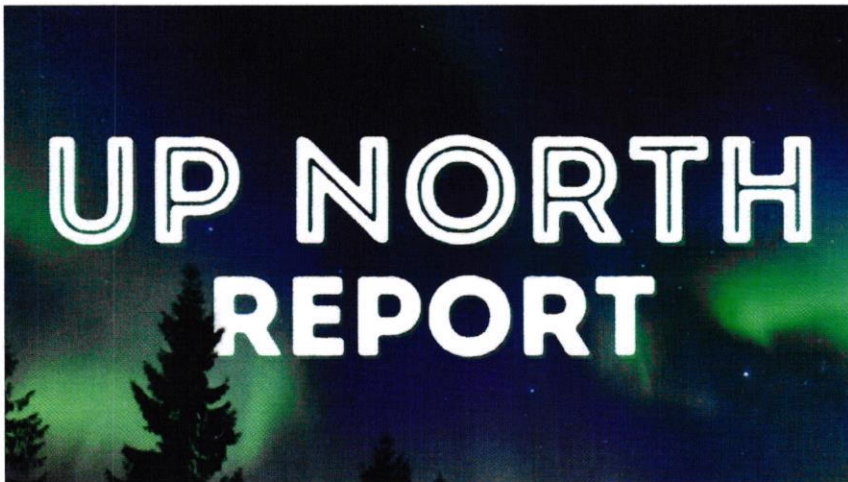
## So much more to know

I could tell you a million other little things we learned about the library. Like how weeding books is just as important as selecting new ones; the shelves are kept below 75% full because they overwhelm people otherwise. (As a book lover, I'd have to disagree, but I'll admit my mind works differently than most.)

Or I could tell you how you can check out games, cake pans and memory kits at the library. Or we could go over the book club kits. Maybe delve deeper into the library's history and Grand Rapids' hidden Carnegie library. I didn't even mention the outdoor activities and seating expansion.

But I think you should go check out the library yourself. There are so many people who would love to share what they know with you. Plus, they're always trying new things and introducing new services. An exhaustive list probably wouldn't be worth the time, because there would probably be something new by the time you read this.

It's just another thing that makes libraries a wonderful place to be.



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Chelsey Perkins, May 18, 2024

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